

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCERhttp://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/opinion/347044_chartered.html**King County Sheriff: Debating reform***Last updated January 11, 2008 4:55 p.m. PT***SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER EDITORIAL BOARD**

Sheriff Sue Rahr wants changes to the King County Charter so she can finish creating an adequate, responsible discipline system for officers. More to the point, perhaps, it's not clear she can be held accountable for promised improvements without greater authority under the charter.

The most valuable change would be modest: Give Rahr the authority to bargain with union deputies and other employees on their working conditions. The executive should remain responsible for wages and benefit bargaining, while the sheriff would handle working conditions, just as the county prosecutor does with the office's attorneys. The change can facilitate improvements in discipline policy, performance evaluations and handling complaints.

With Rahr making strides on accountability and the Charter Review Commission at work on a host of possible changes, it's a good time to consider giving the sheriff enhanced authority.

A unanimous blue ribbon panel on county sheriff's issues and former county executives (one of them ex-Gov. Gary Locke) and common sense all argue for the change. Charter commission chairs Mike Lowry and Lois North sought out the panel's thoughts.

Executive Ron Sims and the deputies' union oppose any change. We don't dispute Sims' or deputies' sincerity about wanting a better system. Sims has taken very seriously the need for reforms in the wake of a 2005 Seattle P-I series, "[Conduct Unbecoming](#)," on discipline and complaints.

Sims believes a split authority would lead to more costly labor settlements, potentially hurting down the county's credit rating. And he suggests the tendency would be to hold the executive for financial concerns. Fair points, but perhaps best weighed by voters.

Another idea we like -- not likely to go far -- is to amend the charter so that the sheriff is once again an appointed office.

Randy Revelle, chairman of the blue ribbon panel and a former county executive, said the members feel strongly about the planned charter change. During Revelle's and Locke's tenures, executives appointed the sheriff. But, as Locke noted in writing to the charter commission, voters decided in 1996 on an elective, non-partisan office, signaling a desire for a more direct "voice in who represented them in public-safety matters."

We hope the charter commission asks the County Council to consider putting the matter on the November ballot. Voters' desire for a say on good law enforcement is clear.

© 1998-2008 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*